

The First Outing by pathvain_aelien

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Summary:

Eleven goes bowling.

The First Outing

It's a very cold Saturday.

The boys don't want to play outside, because it's too cold for that. Dustin points that there's just no fucking point to it. There's no snow, so they can't sled. They can't have a snowball fight. They can't have a snowman competition like they usually do. They lose to Will every time, but it's fun and it holds their attention all day. It's a very cold Saturday, and it's cold enough for snow, but there isn't any.

They don't want to play at the quarry, and they don't want to bike anywhere. They are all in Mike's basement, which is almost as cold as outside. They have absolutely nothing to do.

They've gathered together, because it's Saturday, and they always hang out on Saturday. They don't want to watch a movie, and there's nothing playing at the theater that they want to see. Lucas halfheartedly suggests Star Wars, but they've seen it 147 times already, and they aren't ready to watch it again. They usually take a couple of weeks in between viewings, and they are determined that Eleven will see it next time. They can't wait. She's never seen a real movie before, and watching it with her will be like watching it for the first time again. They think she will like it, because the Force is a hell of a lot like her own power.

They shoot down Lucas's halfhearted suggestion. Will asks if Mike has a new campaign ready, but he doesn't. Not yet. He's put it on hiatus because he has to rewrite a lot of it to make room for El. And they are still teaching her how to play. She is timid because she can see how intense they are about it. She knows it's important to them and that they really want her to get it. They are patient with her (some of them more than others) and she seems to enjoy it. She learns quickly. They might even be ready next weekend.

That still leaves this weekend, though. Normally they'd be at the arcade, but the arcade is closed for fumigation. They are out of ideas and Dustin has already raided the snacks. Dustin, Lucas and Will are used to Mike taking the lead. He's always been their idea man. They keep looking at him, hoping he'll come up with something. He always

does. Mike isn't paying attention to their impatient glances. He's moping on the couch, staring at the ceiling, hands laced behind his head.

"Mike? You want to play Monopoly or something?" Dustin asks, shaking the box at him. Lucas groans. Monopoly is a rainy day game, a last resort game. It always ends the same way, with Lucas and Dustin squabbling over whether or not you can trade properties. One of them will knock the board over before lunging at the other, while Will and Mike watch. Will doesn't think they've ever actually managed to finish a game. Mike doesn't respond. He's staring at a weird stain on the ceiling that he's never noticed before.

"Hello! Earth to Mike, come in Mike. Jesus," Dustin says. When that gets zero response, he throws a few hotels at him. One of them bounces off his forehead and he sits up.

"WHAT?"

Dustin looks pleased. "THANK you. Jesus, where were you?"

Lucas snorts. "Where else?" he asks. He rolls his eyes at Dustin. "Let me take a guess..." he bats his eyes and puts on a horrible falsetto. "Oh, I wonder where El is? What's El doing? Is El thinking about meeeee?" he croons, and then "ouch!" as Mike punches him on the shoulder and knocks him off the sofa arm. He lands awkwardly on a hotel.

"Go screw, Lucas!" Lucas only laughs.

"Come on man, you know that's what you were thinking."

"I was not," Mike denies automatically.

"Yeah? Then what were you thinking about?"

Mike casts his eyes around the room. He can't exactly admit he was just staring at a water stain on the ceiling, but that's the only thing he was doing. Well, mostly. "It's just...I was thinking that El-" and Lucas squeals, "I knew it!"

"Shut up. I was just thinking that it sucks that she can't really leave

and DO anything yet. I mean, she can come here, or Will's, but only if Hopper comes, too. It's like, she's not really back yet because we can't take her anywhere. I mean, she would really like the arcade and stuff."

Lucas misses the point completely. "Dude. The arcade is closed. That's why we're HERE."

Mike rolls his eyes. "I KNOW that, it just sucks that there's like, all this stuff she's never done before and she's safe now, but she's still missing out on everything." And Lucas nods. They all do.

It's true. Eleven is carefully chaperoned. Hopper only allows her to the Wheeler house and the Byers house, and he stays with her the whole time. It's not so bad when she's at Will's, because he's busy making schmoopy eyes at Joyce. But it's awkward at the Wheeler's. He either sits on the couch in the basement and alternates napping with glaring or sits upstairs watching TV with Mike's parents. It's just fucking weird to have the Chief hanging out at his house. And Mike still hasn't forgiven him for keeping Eleven a secret.

Otherwise, Eleven is not allowed out. She's moved into Hopper's house, so at least she's close by, but she can't do anything. It sucks, because there's so much Mike wants to show her. She's never even been to the movies. Hopper says they only have to keep her sequestered for a year, but a year is a long time and she's only been back for a couple of weeks.

"Maybe there's something around town that Hopper would let her do?" Will asks.

Mike snorts in disbelief. "Like what?"

"Well..." He can't think of anything. The whole problem is that Eleven has to avoid people for awhile, and people are kind of a worldwide epidemic. Mike sighs when Will doesn't suggest anything. "It's just totally lame. What difference is a year gonna make anyway? If they want her badly enough, they'd still be looking for her then, too. So why not just take her out and see what happens? At least then we'll know." He doesn't voice his worst fear, which is that Hopper doesn't plan to let her out in a year, either. That he's just mollifying

them all. He knows that Hopper's done that before.

"It's too bad El can't talk him into it," Dustin agrees. "I mean, it's kind of hard to say no to her. Either she looks helpless and you just have to give her whatever she wants, or she's squeezing your brains out."

Mike looks irritated. "She does not act helpless," he says, as if Dustin has accused Eleven of being manipulative.

Dustin sighs. "I know, obviously. I didn't mean it like that. But I mean, like, she's missed out on so much and like, is still learning everything and it's just hard not to try to make her happy. She's like a kitten or something, you just can't resist it."

"Mike can't resist it, anyway," Lucas mutters good-naturedly. They tease him a lot more about El now than they used to. She's not in danger, there are no monsters, and she's definitely not dead, so there's no need to be sappy.

Mike doesn't bother replying. "Yeah, well, Hopper can. The guy is like, hardcore. He's a little lacking in emotion." Will can tell his friend is about 5 seconds from flopping back onto the couch and moodily staring at the ceiling again, but it's okay. He has an idea.

"Guys." They all look at him, because he sounds excited. "Hopper's got his own Kryptonite," he says. And before Lucas and Dustin can start arguing about DC versus Marvel, he continues. "THINK about it." They are all looking at him blankly, even Mike, who should be able to figure this one out, since he has his own kryptonite. "My mom!" It's kind of gross to see Hopper look at his mom that way, he thinks she can do better, honestly. Plus her last boyfriend was eaten by a monster just a couple of weeks ago, but whatever. Adults are weird and he doesn't dwell on it.

They are all looking excited and suddenly, they are talking over each other. "Oh my god, yeah, he just like, STARES at her all the time," Dustin says.

"He'd do anything she wanted. Remember last year when she got him to play Santa at the mall?

“Oh yeah, totally! He was the scariest Santa I’ve ever seen. I swear that kid was crying when he he said he wanted a pony and Hopper just lit that cigarette.”

“Ha, yeah! He nearly caught his beard on fire.”

Will can see they are getting off topic so he raises his voice to speak over them.

“THE POINT IS, she asked him, because Jonathan couldn’t do it. He was sick. And Hopper flat out said no.”

“Actually, he said, ‘are you fucking kidding me?’ Lucas corrects.

Will ignores him. “And then an hour later...”

“Ho ho ho,” Mike says. He smiles.

Ten minutes later, Joyce is going through bills and sorting the ones that need to be paid now, the ones that need to be paid eventually, and the ones that needed to be paid last week. She got a little behind (a little more behind than usual) what with Will being missing, the fake funeral, (and she hasn’t seen a check from the government to reimburse her for THAT, which pisses her off), and the general destruction of the house within the last year. The contractors couldn’t keep the grins off their faces when they saw the damage to the walls and ceiling. That had been ridiculously expensive, and she sincerely hopes that the next monster stays the hell away from her house. Well, she sincerely hopes there isn’t another monster, but she’ll settle for just keeping the house intact and the boys safe. She’s glaring at the wall (formerly a portal to another dimension) and calculating just how much that cost when the door bursts open and four 12 year old boys storm in. She jumps up, she can’t help it. Her reflexes are as sharp as a knife, after what she’s been through.

“What? What’s wrong?” she asks. She resists pulling Will into her arms because she’s trying to give him a little more freedom, and smothering him in front of his friends doesn’t exactly fit in with that plan. Will sees her fear and smiles, shaking his head. He’s always been a sweet boy. Both of her boys are.

“Nothing mom, sorry. We just wanted to ask you something.”

“No monsters?” she asks. They shake their heads.

“No Upside Down?” They shake their heads again.

“Nothing else-weird?” Everyone except Lucas shakes their head.

He nods in assent instead. “Well, she IS weird,” he says in an aggrieved tone, when they all glare at him. “I mean, in a good way.”

Joyce brightens. She loves Eleven. She’s still hoping to convince Hopper to let her move in, or at least let her share custody.

“How is Eleven?”

“She’s great,” Dustin answers. He beams at her, showing off his new teeth.

Mike quickly interjects, “No, she’s not. She’s AWFUL.”

Dustin’s face falls and he rushes to amend his statement.

“Oh yeah, she’s awful. Totally depressed.” Lucas and Will agree, and give their own diagnosis on Eleven’s mental state. According to the boys, Eleven is wasting away and probably seconds near death, because she can’t go out. She tries not to laugh at their earnest faces. She knows they are exaggerating but they have a point. It can’t hurt to let Eleven out every now and then. It might even be better for her, in the long run. She’s not used to crowds or being around people day after day. It’s probably best to ease her into it, slowly.

“I agree with you guys, but Hopper’s in charge when it comes to Eleven,” she says. For now. She intends to change that.

“Yeah but MOM. He’s totally in love with you and everything,” Will says, and Joyce laughs. She’s not ready to go there yet-she misses Bob every day, but the look on Will’s face is priceless.

Dustin agrees with him quickly. “Yeah, if you’d just like, use your feminine styles on him and everything, he’d definitely cave.”

“Feminine styles? Like a dress?” Joyce sounds bewildered.

Mike sighs. “Feminine wiles,” he corrects, before muttering in an undertone to Dustin, “dumb-ass.” Joyce pretends not to hear him.

“Yeah, yeah, wiles. Whatever. If you like, just put on some mascara and like, showed some cleavage or something,” Dustin says. It always works in the movies. Will gags.

“DUSTIN!”

Dustin looks confused. “I mean, like, not that you look bad now or anything. You look really good,” he adds helpfully. He looks at his friend’s faces. “WHAT? What did I say? Jesus.” They are all disgusted with him. Lucas punches him once, hard.

“Idiot.”

Dustin and Lucas are scuffling, but Joyce is already on the phone. She doesn’t know about feminine wiles, but she can be pretty damn forceful when she wants to be. The phone rings, once. Then there’s just silence. She waits for a second, pulls the phone away from her ear. It’s just habit. She fried too many phones last year not to check. It looks fine, and she puts it back to her ear. “Hello?” she asks. Silence. Then a quiet voice.

“Hi.”

She can hear a lamp break on the floor as Lucas disentangles himself from Dustin. She sighs. It would be nice to have a girl in the house for a change. Although Eleven can be pretty destructive when she puts her mind to it. Literally.

“Oh hi, sweetie. It’s Joyce,” she says in the special voice she only uses for Eleven. Eleven responds immediately.

“Hi Joyce.” She sounds happy.

“How are you? I miss you.” There’s a pause. She’s used to it. Eleven usually waits a little too long to reply, like she’s thinking her response through carefully first. It’s endearing.

"I am good. Miss you, too." Another beat, then, "how are you?" Carefully. She sounds like she's been practicing it, the lost art of the polite telephone etiquette. Joyce smiles.

"I'm great, thanks. Actually, we were just talking about you," she says, and then she suddenly feels a presence near her arm, the one connected to the phone.

"We?" Eleven asks, confused.

At the same time, Mike asks, "Is that El?" He starts to reach his hand out to snag the phone away from Joyce, then catches himself. Lucas and Dustin have forgotten their argument. They are crying with mirth.

"Oh Jesus, look. Is that El?" Lucas asks Dustin, in a falsetto that is presumably supposed to resemble Mike's voice. Dustin widens his eyes and affects the sweet expression El usually wears.

"Oh, Mike!" he coos, and swoons toward Lucas.

Lucas catches him. "Oh, El!" he cries rapturously. Will is torn between laughing at them both and elbowing them.

Mike, on the other hand, hasn't even noticed.

"Yeah, sweetie. The boys are over here and they want to take you out. They drafted me to wheedle Hopper into it," Joyce tells her. There's a long silence, and Joyce replays what she's just said. She knows Eleven probably didn't catch half of that. "I mean, the boys are here. They want to see you. They wanted me to ask Hopper," she says instead.

Mike can no longer resist. He keeps his hands away from the phone this time but raises his voice, letting it carry. "Yeah, we want to take you out, like somewhere outside the basement."

There's no pause this time. "Mike?" she asks, clearly ecstatic.

"Yeah, that's Mike," Joyce says, amused.

Mike reaches for the phone again. "Hi, El!" he yells, when Joyce

lightly bats his hand away.

“Hi El!” Lucas mutters to Dustin. Dustin puckers his lips in response.

“Hi, Mike,” Eleven answers. Mike’s lost his focus for a moment, because he’s busy glaring daggers at Lucas and Dustin.

“Shut up, wastoids. You don’t see me doing that kind of crap when Max is around, do you?” he hisses.

Dustin looks abashed, but Lucas perks up. “See? I knew it. You liiiike her,” he calls.

Mike lunges for him. “Shut up, Lucas!” And there’s another scuffle. Something else breaks.

Joyce tunes it out. “Put Hopper on the phone, okay? Let’s see if we can get you out of there.”

There’s a clunk as the phone is unceremoniously dropped to dangle against the wall. “Hopper!” Eleven shouts. There’s a crash as Hopper knocks something over.

“Christ, what is it? Are you hurt?” he asks. Silence, presumably Eleven is shaking her head. “Well, what? You don’t have to shout,” he grumbles. Joyce can hear Eleven, very faintly. “Phone,” is all she says. Another clunk.

“Yeah?” It’s Hopper.

“Hi Hop,” Joyce says.

“Oh Joyce, I didn’t know it was you. She didn’t tell me,” he says. He’s careful never to say her name over the phone. He scratches his chin absently, scrounging for something to talk about. Then he remembers that she called him. “What can...I do for you?” he asks. He was about a second from saying “what can I do you for,” which just doesn’t sound appropriate at all, under the circumstances.

“Well, I’m glad you asked.” Satisfaction in that voice, and he raises an eyebrow.

“What is it?”

“I’m not going to take no for an answer.”

“Uh.” Okay. He doesn’t know how to respond to that.

“You aren’t going to like it.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But you’re just going to have to deal with it this once.”

“Mmm.” He’s noncommittal, until he figures out what she wants. He’s getting an idea. It’s hard to miss, because Eleven is suddenly standing so close to him that she’s touching him. He glances at her and can’t miss it. The hope is all over her face.

“No, Joyce.”

“Hopper.”

“It’s not safe.” Eleven’s face falls.

“Hopper. It’s as safe as it will ever be.”

“No.”

“The boys raised a good point earlier. Why not let her out, and see what happens? See if they’re still out there?”

Hopper grimaces. “No, Joyce.”

“Where you can still keep an eye on her,” she adds quickly.

“Joyce.”

“We both can. We’ll keep an eye on her and see if anyone’s watching.”

He sighs. “I don’t like it either, keeping her prisoner,” and Eleven’s eyebrows draw together as she considers the word. “But it’s her life we’re talking about. That’s gotta be the most important thing.”

In the Byers household, Joyce puts her forehead to the new wallpaper. She takes a deep breath. "Of course, that's the most important thing. And that is why we will be there with her," she says, and sees the boys' dejected looks. She amends, "we will be watching from far enough away that they can't see us-if there's even a they anymore. We'll be close enough to stop them if we have to. The important thing is that we will finally know what the risk is right now. We've got to figure it out someday."

He hasn't made a sound but she knows he's about to deny her again. "And she's a goddamned 12 year old that's never been to a restaurant. She's never been to a movie. She's never been trick or treating. She's never been to a mall. It's not healthy for her, Hop! She's been a prisoner for her entire life and it's not fair to her to keep her a prisoner for the next year or however long it takes until you decide it's okay! And I know her safety is important. Do you think I don't care about that? Really, do you? We. Will. Be. There. To. Keep. Her. Safe."

Her voice is a low growl. She suddenly sounds a lot more like Hopper than Hopper does. "And I am telling you right now, Hop. You'd better get that girl over here within the next thirty minutes." She looks at her watch. It's 11:30. "It's half after, Hop." She's careful not even to say the word. "You'd better get her here by noon."

She slams the phone down so hard it makes a tinkling sound she's never heard before. Screw it. She can buy a new one. Again. The boys are goggling at her, except for Will. He's seen the transformation from mother to tiger before.

"Wow, Mrs. B," Dustin says, impressed. "That's a lot better than feminine styles."

"Yes, Dustin, it is," she says through gritted teeth. "So where are you guys planning to take her, anyway?" There's a long silence. She stops glaring at the phone.

"Um." Mike hasn't thought it through this far. He looks at Will, who shrugs. "...the movies?"

"No, there's nothing good playing."

“Yeah, and her first movie has to be Star Wars, anyway.”

Lucas scratches his ear. Dustin looks at Will.

“...the arcade?”

“Still closed.”

“Oh yeah. Shit. There’s not a lot to do in this town, is there?” he realizes what he’s just said in front of Mrs. B. “Sorry. Shit. I mean, sorry.”

Joyce sighs. “Well, you’d better pick something quickly.” She can see they’re flummoxed. They look dejected. They are right back to where they were an hour ago, in Mike’s basement. The guys are all looking at Mike, because he should be the one to pick the first thing El does. He has to make it good because he really wants her to enjoy it. He tries to think of the most normal, fun thing he can. Something that everyone does.

“Um, bowling?”

They all look at each other, considering it. Bowling is ordinary. It’s normal. It’s pretty fun, and not that difficult. At least, it doesn’t matter if you fuck it up. It’s just a game. “That might work,” Will says. “It won’t be that busy at this time anyway, don’t want to overwhelm her or anything.”

“Plus there’s nachos and pizza and a shitload of stuff she hasn’t tried. Sorry, Mrs. B.”

“And music! She likes music.”

“I don’t think the alley is like, a top priority for any government weirdos.”

“Yeah, and mom and the Chief can like, stay in the car and watch the parking lot. Or they can come in and sit really far away and it’s like they won’t be there at all!” Her son sounds jubilant at the idea and Joyce tries not to laugh.

“All right. Bowling.”

Hopper jerks his head away from the phone as he hears the other end crash into the receiver. Oh yeah, she's pissed. He looks at Eleven. She is frowning at him. Yep, she's pissed, too. At the moment, he isn't sure which one is more threatening, Joyce or the telekinetic preteen. His mind feels completely blank. He honestly has no idea what to do now. If he gives in, she'll want to go out all of the time. Everywhere. And Joyce will encourage her. Hopper knows it isn't safe. They can't take that kind of chance. On the other hand, it's one day. And he's made an agreement with the doctor. He sighs and tries to save face.

"All right, kid. Listen up."

Eleven looks at him.

"This is the only time until I say so, you get it? The only time. I mean it," he says. And he does. For now. "I know it's hard and I know it's unfair, but I'm looking out for you. I don't want them to ever get ahold of you again, you know that, right?" She nods, looking abashed. "So it's only okay to go out when I say so, and I don't want to hear any argument in the future." He knows he's more likely to see her argument than hear it, but she knows what he means. She nods again.

"Fine. Get ready." She just looks at him. He looks at the clock. They have 25 minutes, and it takes 9 to get to Joyce's.

"Ready?" she asks hesitantly.

"Yeah, ready, like put on some clothes or whatever." She looks down at herself.

"I have clothes." It's true, she's wearing her overalls. He sighs.

"Yeah. I know. But usually, when you're going out with friends, in public-in front of people-you wear something nice. Get dressed up or something. I don't know."

"...I don't have a dress."

"I don't mean an actual dress, I mean something nicer. Nicer than overalls." She looks at him blankly. He gestures to himself.

"Look, see. I'm wearing a shirt with a hole in it, see?"

"Yes."

"Okay, so I'm going to change my shirt. I'll put on one that doesn't have holes in it."

"My overalls don't have holes in them."

"I know. But I mean, I'm taking this shirt, which is fine for around the house with just us, and I will replace it with one that's good for being around other people."

"What other people?"

"Just anyone. When you leave the house, you put on something more appropriate."

"Appropriate?"

"Better for whatever you're going to be doing."

"I don't know what we will be doing."

"Okaaaay," he nearly yells, and takes a deep breath. Counts to 10. Adds another second, for the hell of it. Tries again.

"You wear pajamas to bed, right?"

"Yes."

"But you wouldn't wear them over at Mike's, right?" She shrugs. She's worn sleep-clothes at Mike's before, because he gave them to her when she stayed in her fort. He doesn't go there. Takes a different tack.

"Okay. How about this. Yesterday on Days of our Lives, Marlana was in bed, right?" He feels like an idiot, but Eleven nods. Yes, Marlana was in bed. "And then she woke up." Eleven nods again. He walks her through it, slowly. "And then she went out to lunch. And she changed her clothes."

“They were dirty?”

“No. No. No. They weren’t dirty. She wanted to look nice. For lunch.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Think about it, they change their clothes all the time, right? For different occasions. Kristen wore a dress when she went to that dinner party and tried to steal Bo away from Hope again. Hope wore jeans when she went sailing because jeans are comfortable and she was with her long-lost twin brother. Remember?”

“Yes.”

“Understand?”

“Yes, I understand.”

“Okay then. So get dressed.” She goes into her room. Stands in front of her closet. He takes the opportunity to change his shirt and put on some deodorant. No time to take a shower. When he passes Eleven’s room, she’s still just standing there.

“Hopper.”

“Yeah?”

She enunciates carefully. “Am I going to a party or sailing?” Hopper feels his right eye twitch spasmodically. He looks at the clock again. It’s 11:45.

Mike, Dustin, Lucas and Will sit next to each other on the couch. They are half watching TV and half watching the clock. Joyce is peering out of the blinds, car keys in one hand. She will go to Hopper if he won’t come to her. Eleven deserves a chance to be a normal kid for a day. And Will hasn’t looked this happy in a long time. It’s noon. Joyce is scowling. She stalks into the kitchen and jerks her wallet out of her purse. The boys look at her, momentarily diverted.

“Dude, she looks pissed,” Dustin hisses. Joyce doesn’t pretend not to hear him this time.

"I am pissed, Dustin." He looks impressed.

"So are you like, going to kick his ass now or something?"

"Yep."

"Wow."

"Yep. Get in the car."

"Huh?"

"Get in the car, all of you, now!" she yells. They scramble off the couch and towards the door. Lucas is barely out of the door when he brings himself to a halt, because someone's standing below the stoop. He manages to keep from knocking her over and then Will hits him from behind.

"Guys! Stop!" He yells. Dustin knocks into Will.

"Stop! Go back!" Mike piles into Dustin and Lucas topples over. Hopper yanks Eleven away from the door and towards the right, where his car is, in case the rest come tumbling after. Her eyes are huge. Lucas gets up, shakes the dust off his arms. The guys are jammed into the door and have no idea what the holdup is.

"Lucas. Move your ass, man," Dustin calls from the door.

"Three stooges," Lucas mutters. He waves at El. She smiles at him.

"Lucas. Get out of the way! We've got to go get her!" Mike. Eleven cranes her neck to see what's going on. There's just a guy-pile in the door, as if they all tried to go through it at the same time and none of them will give up being first.

"Yeah, yeah. You can't wait, I know," Lucas says. He grins at Hopper. Hopper's eye is still twitching.

"Lucas!"

"ALL RIGHT!"

Lucas moves out of the way and Will squeezes out. Dustin and Mike try to go through at the same time again and Dustin elbows him back. Hard. Mike stumbles and falls backwards, landing hard on his back. “Numbnuts,” he mutters to Mike as he exits. Joyce raises her eyebrow at him. “Sorry Mrs. B.” He’s out. Sees Hopper and Eleven.

“Oh.”

“Oh what?” Mike calls from the floor. He hit his funny bone when he fell and it really hurts. He reminds himself to kick Dustin’s ass later. Dustin doesn’t bother answering. Eleven looks a little bewildered but Dustin can tell she’s about 10 seconds away from laughing. He can always tell when someone just needs to be prodded a little into letting it out. It’s his superpower.

“We just couldn’t wait to see you,” he jokes, and she laughs. It’s a quiet laugh, but a laugh. Good enough. Will moves in for a hug. She hugs back. Lucas and Dustin usually don’t hug her, unless she’s recently returned from the dead. Will always does, and she’s used to it now.

“See who?” Mike asks, running down the steps. He stops. Sees Hopper, looking like he’s aged ten years since Mike last saw him. Which was only three days ago. Sees Eleven. “Oh.” Will gently lets her go. “Hi, El,” he says, trying to sound a little more put-together, which is difficult since he was on his ass about five seconds ago.

“Hi, Mike.”

He isn’t sure whether to hug or not. Will hugged her, but he’s already said hi, so it would be weird to hug her now, wouldn’t it? It was a lot easier to know what to do when he hadn’t seen her in almost a year. He decides not to. He smiles at her instead, and she smiles back. Joyce is locking the door. She comes down and hugs Eleven.

“Hi sweetie.”

“Hi, Joyce.”

“You look nice,” Joyce tells her. Eleven is still wearing her overalls with a blue shirt. She looks triumphantly over at Hopper. Hopper

pinches his nose between his fingers. He has a headache.

“Let’s just go,” he says curtly.

“Two cars?” Joyce asks him.

“We can all fit,” he says. Joyce gets into the passenger seat. Lucas piles into the back and scoots all the way over. Will follows, and Eleven follows him. Dustin starts to clamber in and then sees Mike’s face. He looks frantic. Dustin tries not to laugh and lets him in first. Mike climbs in, sits next to Eleven.

He glances at her, quickly. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but now he wishes he’d let Dustin in. He has an audience now. They’ve all been together plenty of times, but somehow it’s different when he’s sitting next to her in the Chief’s station wagon. Her leg is pressing against his and she’s too close. He can’t breathe. He doesn’t know how to be normal with her anymore. Or if he was ever able to feel normal with her. Whatever it is, the feeling’s worse now. After thinking she was dead or lost for a year.

They are all completely silent. Lucas is giggling to himself and Dustin is staring at Mike with alarm because Mike looks like he is about to lose his shit and Will is looking embarrassed for all of them. Mike prays that someone breaks the fucking silence because he can’t take it anymore. He is looking at his knees, because that seems like the safest thing to do. His face feels hot as the silence spins out. Will helps him out. Finally. He’s not used to starting the conversation, but Mike is freaking out and the other guys are useless.

“So um,” he says, to no one. He looks out the window. Sees the theater. “There’s supposed to be a Star Wars marathon in a couple of weeks,” he says. He points to the sign as they wait on a red light. They already know that. They’ve been discussing it for a week, ever since the sign went up. He glares at Dustin and Lucas, one after the other, telling them with his eyes to shut the hell up and help Mike out. To help Eleven out, too, because this is all new for her and she’s bound to be nervous. Nervous and overwhelmed. Will is pretty good at this type of silent communication and they read him, loud and clear.

“YOU DON’T SAY,” Lucas says in a robotic voice. He sounds like a bored guest making dinner-party small talk, but at least he’s trying.

“Would you look at that,” Dustin marvels, also in his best ooh-this-is-a-marvelous-party voice.

“Wow,” Lucas replies woodenly.

“We simply must see it,” Dustin says. He’s still using his party voice, but now he sounds vaguely British. Will covers his face with his hands and Mike turns beet-red.

“Jesus Christ.” Faint from the driver’s seat. Hopper turns on the radio, trying to drown them out. Lucas gives it another shot. He points out the first thing he sees, which is the school.

“Look, El! That’s our school,” he says. He points to it. Blanches. Remembers the last time she was there. Shit. Mike jerks his head up, giving him a look that clearly says are you fucking kidding me?

Everyone stares at him.

“Demogorgon,” is all she says. Quietly. Looking down at her lap. Mike quickly checks her face, to make sure she’s okay. The nervousness is gone, at least temporarily.

“Oh shit. Sorry. I forgot...” Lucas trails off lamely.

She hasn’t, and she can feel Mike looking at her. She looks up, meets his worried eyes. He hasn’t forgotten, either. She sees the pain in his face. The worry for her. She doesn’t like to see it because it means he’s unhappy but she’s also glad, because it means he is her friend.

Are you okay, El? She can almost hear it.

She tells him with her eyes.

I’m okay, Mike.

She is more worried for him, because she knows what part of him thought that night. What part of him thought for the next 353 nights. She fought the Bad Men and she fought the Demogorgon, and it was

terrifying, yes. It was painful. The energy she expended nearly killed her. But she had one advantage over Mike, after. She knew that he was safe. She speaks to him with her eyes again. He hasn't looked away.

Are you okay, Mike?

Yeah.

Promise?

He smiles.

Promise.

She smiles, too. They are still looking at each other. Everyone else is looking at them, too. Dustin and Lucas aren't even going to tease him about it because it's just kind of weird. And not. Familiar. It reminds Dustin of the way it was before she disappeared. Like they're talking to each other on a slightly different channel than the rest of them are using. Will smiles, looks out the window. Doesn't say a word.

They hit a bump and the concentration is broken. Mike looks down. Breathes. Joyce turns the radio down, faces the back to check on Eleven, to see if she's noticed the unusual tension in the atmosphere. Eleven hasn't noted it. She's looking past Will out the window. It's the first time she's really seen Hawkins, at least in daylight. The first time she's had time to look, been safe enough to. She sees the giant Christmas tree in the square.

"Mike."

He turns his head in her direction a little but doesn't meet her eyes. She's still too close and there's still not enough air.

"Yeah?"

"What's that?" she asks. She tilts her head to the window. He looks, too and sees the square. The Christmas tree. It's decorated but it hasn't been lit yet, the ceremony is next week.

"Oh! That's the Christmas tree," he says. She looks at it again before

they are past it, then at him.

“What’s Christmas?” Mike can hear Joyce draw in a quick, pained breath, but it’s quiet. Eleven doesn’t notice. Mike wants to keep it that way. Lucas and Dustin are goggling at her. It surprises them each time, how much she hasn’t experienced. Even though they know what she’s been through, where she grew up, they can’t imagine someone not knowing what Christmas is.

“Christmas is awesome! It’s on the 25th of December. There’s a ton of amazing food, like turkey and pie and stuff. And Christmas lights. Everyone decorates their houses. With trees like that one. You put lights on them. There’s a ton of stuff you can do, like caroling and—oh!” He’s forgotten the best part. “And you get presents,” he adds hastily. Before she notices the reaction she’s caused.

“Presents?”

“Yeah. Everyone buys you things that you want or that they think you’d like.”

“Everyone?”

“Well, not like, everyone in the world. But your family and friends and stuff do.”

“For just me?” She asks. Mike laughs, but it’s a nice laugh. It doesn’t make her feel bad for asking.

“No, not on Christmas. Everyone gets presents.” Well, not everyone, he amends silently to himself, but he’s not about to try to explain religions to her. “So like, you’d buy your friends and—” he chokes off the “family” before he can say it —“and everyone you like things that they want. It’s like, the best day of the year, you’ll see.”

“Yeah, it’s awesome. We’ll take you ice skating and caroling and sledding and everything. There’s advent calendars-chocolate!” Dustin looks rapturous. Not just at the chocolate, but at the sheer amount of stuff she’ll get to do. “And we’ll build snowmen and shit. That’s where you make like, people or animals or whatever out of snow, and dress them up. It’s like, the season full of activity. There’s a ton of

cool things to do. Like the snow ball.”

Mike turns a delicate shade of red but only Will notices. Mike figures that she probably doesn’t remember, anyway. She was drained, even before the government assholes showed up. She’d been using her power too much that day. He remembers her on the table, in that last moment, clutching his hands. Blood flowing out of her ears and out of her nose. She looked like she was dying, even before the Demogorgon burst in. He doesn’t want to think about that. The point is, she doesn’t remember.

“Snow ball,” she repeats.

“Yeah, it’s this dance. Lots of music and everyone from school. It’s pretty fun, I guess,” Dustin answers.

“Cheesy?” Mike’s head jerks up and he looks at her quickly before he looks away. Turns red again. Will’s the only one who sees it, but he can’t help this time. Doesn’t get it this time.

Dustin laughs.

“Yeah! Totally! Yeah, pretty much. Sounds like you’ve heard all about it already.”

“Yes. Last year.” She lowers her eyes slightly. Mike is studying the backs of his hands and just generally staying out of this conversation.

“Yeah, we have one every year.”

Every year?

Thank Christ. The car has stopped. Mike leans past Dustin, opens the door, and practically jumps over his lap in his race to get out. He’ll have to process that conversation later, when he can figure out how much she remembers from that night.

Dustin and Lucas hustle inside and get in line. Will follows more slowly, talking to his mom before joining them. Hopper and Joyce will keep an eye on the door from his car. Hopper’s already done a circuit of the room, just to be safe. He lets Mike come in with Eleven. Eleven is hanging back, walking slowly. It’s loud and shiny and

bright, and there are a lot of people.

Mike slows down to match her pace. They're barely inside. He looks at the alley carefully, trying to see it from her eyes. The clash and rattle as the pins are knocked down. The music blaring. People laughing and talking over it. There aren't many people here, not as many as there will be tonight, but it's probably a lot for her. Too many. He suddenly notices the way the shine on the wax almost hurts your eyes. They are walking slowly past lane 3 when someone bowls a strike and the table erupts into loud cheers. He can feel Eleven shrink against him, just barely. She's trying to stay calm. He stops.

"Hey. You okay?"

She looks at him uncertainly.

Yes, she is okay. She is with her friends and this is all normal. They aren't afraid. They are all happy. She can see Dustin and Lucas and Will across the room and she just has to join them.

No, she isn't okay. She is terrified. She has only been in such a loud place once before, the last night at the school. The screams and guns and the monster.

He reads her face. "It's okay, I know it's really loud at first, but you'll get used to it. I promise, it's really fun. We used to go every week," he says. "You want to give it a try?" She nods, once. He's still reading her face. "We can go back outside if you want, I don't mind. It's totally okay." He wants to make sure she knows she has a choice.

"I'll try it," she says.

"Are you sure? We really don't have to. We can do something else. It's whatever you want." She can hear his earnestness and she gives him a tiny half-smile.

"Mike."

"Yeah?"

"I'm okay."

And then he asks first this time.

“Promise?”

A bigger smile.

“Promise.”

Dustin is clutching his shoes, tapping them together and waiting for Lucas to get his. The guy is taking forever. He’s gaping at his friends because they’re doing that thing again.

“Dude. That is totally not normal.”

“Mhm?”

“That.”

“What?”

“They’re doing it again.”

Lucas turns around, follows his gaze. Sees Mike and Eleven staring at each other. He snorts and turns back around.

“Looks normal to me.”

“No way.”

“Uh, yeah. They do it all the time.” He turns back to the counter, tapping his fingers impatiently.

“Yeah, I know. And it’s not normal.”

“Dustin. It’s normal. It’s called a crush. I’ve seen you staring at Max like that.”

“Um, no. You haven’t.”

“Um, yes. I have.”

“Nope. I have a crush on Max, fine. That-“ he points-“is not a crush, man. Normal people don’t do that.”

“No? Fine, they’re gonna get married or whatever. They’re in love,”

he says sarcastically.

“That’s not a married thing either. I’m telling you, normal people don’t just stare at each other like that. Jonathan and Nancy don’t even do that and you know they’re gonna get married someday.”

Lucas scoffs. He’s not particularly invested in Jonathan and Nancy’s love life.

“Then what is it, genius?”

“I dunno, it’s like...” he thinks about it, lights up. “It’s like a fucking Vulcan mind-meld, dude!” He sounds excited. Lucas focuses on his friends again. Glances at Dustin.

“What, like, she’s got some super power that makes him act like an idiot?” The idea makes him laugh.

“No! It’s like...it’s like they’ve both got it. It’s like they talk to each other without ever opening their mouths.”

Lucas looks at them again, more closely. They are gazing at each other, solemn. Mike looks concerned. El seems scared. He says something, and she replies. They stare at each other again. Then they both smile, at the same time. Laugh. It is totally, completely not normal.

“Damn,” Lucas says. “That is fucking weird.”

“I know, right?”

“Totally abnormal.” They are both watching their friends, fascinated. It’s creepy and weird but also interesting. It’s like watching Star Wars or Star Trek or something. Lucas doesn’t notice the guy thrusting his shoes at him. He’s been trying to get his attention for a few seconds. Lucas watches as the contact suddenly breaks. Mike and Eleven both turn away from each other at the same time, start walking together at the same time, towards them.

“It’s normal,” a voice besides Dustin says. He turns around, surprised. It’s Will. He’s back from the bathroom and leaning against the counter. Dustin doesn’t know how long he’s been standing there, his attention

was fixated elsewhere.

“No. Look.” Dustin prepares to explain it all over again, quickly but Will cuts him off and corrects himself.

“It’s normal for them.”

“Huh?”

“I mean, they’ve always done it.”

Dustin and Lucas look at each other uncertainly, trying to remember if Mike and Eleven had a Vulcan mind-meld last year. “You mean, since that last day?” Lucas asks. He definitely remembers a look they shared, when she turned to say goodbye to Mike. But that was different, she had been certain of her imminent death.

“No. The first day.” And they are both incredulous now.

“You weren’t even there on the first day! You were in the Upside Down!” Dustin nearly yells it and Lucas shushes him. “Oh. Yeah. Anyway, you weren’t there, we all met her together when we were looking for you.”

“I know. That’s when it started. It’s like...like you guys were looking for me, and Mike was, too, but he was also looking for her. And he didn’t know it. And she was looking for him. That’s why she was there. It was like...magnets!” he exclaims, happy to finally define what he knows.

“How do you know?” Dustin asks.

Will knows because he just knows. And he senses it from Eleven. “I just do.”

“Um...okaaaay.”

“Like that’s normal?” Lucas asks him, and Will grins.

“Nothing about any of this is normal. In case you haven’t noticed, one of our best friends is a Jedi. We’ve been to another dimension... well, two of us have, anyway. We left normal behind a long time ago,

guys.” It’s true. And they don’t really mind. It’s worked out for the best, and it was pretty damned interesting, at least. When it wasn’t terrifying.

“Now shut up about normal and abnormal.”

“Why? They won’t care.”

“Eleven will. How do you think she feels every day?” Not normal. They know. And they don’t need to ask Will how he knows this, either. He knows because he feels the same. They cast their minds about for a new line of conversation as they are joined by their friends.

“Oh! My shoes!” Lucas cries, when the guy finally loses patience and hits him in the shoulder with them.

“Would you look at that,” Dustin marvels. The three of them begin to laugh. They can’t stop.

“What’s so funny?” Mike asks.

“Nothing,” they all wheeze in unison. Mike narrows his eyes and they quiet. It’s an effort but they manage it.

“I’ll get our shoes,” Mike says quietly to El. He sees her look at her feet. “You have to get special bowling shoes so you don’t slip,” he explains immediately. Dustin waggles his shoes at her to demonstrate. “Don’t worry, you’ll get yours back after.”

“Okay.”

“What size shoe do you wear?” They both look at her feet this time. “Oh. Okay. Slip your right shoe off, sometimes it’s written in there.” She does, but there’s nothing. “Oh. Okay then. Um, hang on.” He pulls her back a little and lets the line move around him. He looks at his feet. Dustin’s. Lucas’s. Will’s.

“Okay, hold still. I’ll measure it like this.” He stands next to her, presses his left foot against her right one. Too big. “Okay, that won’t work. Dustin?” Dustin slides his right foot against her left one. She laughs, because people are looking, but they are looking in a nice

way. Smiling at their antics.

"Next!" Dustin calls and moves out of the way. Lucas takes his place. It's too big.

"Next!" Will stands next to her. "Don't worry," Dustin reassures her. "If that doesn't work, we'll just pull everyone out of line and measure them, too," and she laughs again. "It will be like Cinderella in reverse." She doesn't know what Cinderella is, so she just smiles at him. Will's foot is nearly a perfect fit, and he gets back in line to get theirs.

They get their balls. Mike tells her to pick one that isn't too heavy or light. She does. They open a lane. "Teams or not?" Dustin asks.

"Not," Will says. Lucas types in their names. He pauses when entering hers.

"El," she says, and he enters it.

"I'm putting you last so you can watch us first, okay?" She nods. "Okay, Dustin, you're up."

Dustin beckons grandly towards El.

"Follow me, madam. Allow me to demonstrate." She walks towards him. "Okay, first, you pick up your ball, like this," he demonstrates, walks forward. Motions her to follow. "Then you can stand wherever you want. I like to stand here. Don't go beyond that line." He pauses and she nods. "Okay." "Then you just like, hurl it. Try to aim for the middle. The point is to knock as many of those down as you can." He points to the pins.

"You get to go twice, so you can try to earn points that way. Each one gives you points. Then it's someone else's turn. The goal is to get as many points as possible. Got it?" She nods again.

"Okay, then. Watch a master at work," he says, and throws. Eleven watches the ball glide down the lane. It reaches the end. Nothing happens.

"But you didn't knock any down," she says. The guys at the table

cackle.

"She's right! Watch a master at work, my ass. You suck!" Lucas says. Dustin glares.

"Ignore them. I'm just warming up. Practicing, okay?" She nods. "Okay. Now watch." He does it again. The ball hits one pin and topples it over. Another wobbles but stays up. The guys hoot with laughter, and Eleven does, too.

"Jeez, El, I'm hurt. I'm like, sincerely hurt, that you'd laugh at me. I expect it from those dickwads-" he points to the table. "But not from you." And she giggles.

"You suck, Dustin," she says. Dustin laughs.

"Yeah? Just wait til it's your turn." She smiles widely. Sits down. Watches the rest of them.

When it's her turn, she gets up, picks up her ball, and stands in position. Looks at the lane. Concentrates. Throws. They all watch the ball roll down the lane and into the gutter. They laugh at the scowl on her face. She waits for her ball to return, focuses. Throws. The ball rolls into the gutter again and out of sight. She concentrates her face. Glowers. Stares at the pins. The pins topple over with such force that it looks like they've exploded. Her forehead relaxes and she turns around. Smiles at the dumbfounded expressions on their faces. Glides back to her seat. They are all silent.

"Dude. We forgot to tell her she can't do that," Dustin says. They all laugh. Will looks impressed. He's never actually seen her do it before.

"All right, fine, we'll let it count this time. Call it beginner's luck. Next time, handicap yourself so we have a chance, all right?" Dustin asks, and she nods. Her eyes are merry. When it's her turn again, she refrains from cheating. Throws poorly. Waits on her ball to try again.

Suddenly Lucas laughs. "What?" Mike asks him. He's thinking about going up there and helping her. Not that he's great, or anything, but he can help a little.

"This is that moment."

“What moment?”

“That moment.”

“What moment?”

“That moment in the movies.”

“What?”

“Where the girl can’t play pool or whatever, and the guy goes up behind her and like, puts his arms over her arms and corrects her and then makes out with her and everything. You should go do that.” The guys laugh. Laugh harder when Mike turns red.

“Oh man! You were totally going to do that.”

“I was not!”

“Yeah, you were!”

“Not the making out part!” They all laugh and he huffs. She knocks down half the pins, with her ball instead of her mind, and it’s his turn. He walks jerkily to the line and bowls. Poorly. He waits, tries again. Gets a gutter ball. Curses.

“Maybe you should be the girl in the movie,” Lucas says wisely. Mike ignores him.

When the game ends, Will and Dustin get in line to load up on snacks. Mike goes to exchange his ball while Eleven and Lucas wait at the table. He comes back, holding a green one. 8 pounds. He doesn’t sit yet, just hefts it. Eleven gets up and plays with the terminal. He’s still ignoring Lucas when the song changes. He identifies it immediately and turns brick red, because he’s played it for Eleven before. When she was missing.

I hope that you’re okay. I can’t really talk much today, because my throat hurts. Over.

Lying in my bed I hear the clock tick,
And think of you
Caught up in circles confusion--
Is nothing new
Flashback--warm nights--
Almost left behind
Suitcases of memories,
Time after--

He freezes, bowling ball curled up to his chest. Stops breathing. Fuck. But she won't know what it is. He knows that she heard him sometimes, but surely not every night. And she's not used to music so she probably can't identify it anyway. It must all sound pretty similar to her right now. He stares at the ball. Green with gold flecks. He tries to stop it but lets the memory wash over him.

But um, I heard this song the other day, and it made me think of you. So I'm not going to talk but I'll play it for you, okay? Hang on. Over.

Sometimes you picture me--
I'm walking too far ahead
You're calling to me, I can't hear
What you've said--
Then you say--go slow--
I fall behind—

So that's a little sappy and everything, so don't tell the guys, okay? Over.

The second hand unwinds
If you're lost you can look--and you will find me
Time after time

Sappy is like, too cheesy. Over.

If you fall I will catch you--I'll be waiting
Time after time

Cheesy is like, too sweet or emotional, that kind of thing. Kind of embarrassing. Something that's not for friends. Over.

After my picture fades and darkness has
Turned to gray
Watching through windows--you're wondering
If I'm OK

Lucas isn't paying attention; he's turning his neck from side to side and letting it crack. Mike doesn't look at Eleven.

Like, you know, for people who are more than friends. Like...when I asked you to the Snow Ball. Over.

If you're lost you can look--and you will find me
Time after time
If you fall I will catch you--I'll be waiting
Time after time
You said go slow--
I fall behind
The second hand unwinds--
If you're lost you can look--and you will find me
Time after time

Anyway...sometimes cheesy or sappy is okay with some people when they are more than friends. The guys wouldn't like it but I still think it's a good song...

If you fall I will catch you--I'll be waiting
Time after time

Then it's finally over. It felt like at least ten minutes. He swears the radio version wasn't that long. There's an advertisement for the snack stand. Mike inhales as quietly as he can. Apparently he stopped breathing for a few seconds because he feels dizzy. Will and Dustin are on their way back, cradling snacks and cans of coke.

...and it made me think of you. I hope you liked it.

"I liked it. Thank you." She says it in her quietest voice but there's no mistaking it or what she's referring to.

His sweaty hand slips over the ball and he fumbles it, closes his eyes with a wince. His foot is going to hurt tomorrow. Nothing happens, and he opens his eyes. The ball is motionless, hovering silently, even with his waist. Lucas's mouth drops open and Dustin and Will move to block the view from the snack stand. Mike grabs the ball out of the air, walks it to the rest and puts it down gently. He looks at Eleven. She's already looking at him.

"Thank you," he says. Her mouth lifts in a small smile.

She turns her attention to Dustin, because he's thrusting snacks at her. "Okay, we've got nachos...you ever had those?" She shakes her head. "You're going to love them. Nachos...Reese's...pretzels...Will's got the twizzlers and moon pies." The snacks rain down on the console. Eleven just stares at them.

"Jesus, Dustin. Hungry?" Mike asks. Dustin shrugs.

"I tried to get like, one of everything to see what she likes." Will hands her the twizzlers and moon pies and she takes them.

"We ran out of money, though," Will says and grins. "Oh! Gummy worms. Here." He hands them over. She looks disgusted.

"Worms?" She wrinkles her nose slightly. The boys laugh.

"Not like, real worms. Promise. They just look like them but they're made out of 100% non-wormy ingredients," Lucas tells her.

"Why would someone...make something look like worms?" They look at one another, baffled. Shrug.

"No idea, honestly," Dustin says breezily. "Here, try one." He rips

open the package and hands her a green one. She takes it gingerly and holds it, feeling the coarse sugar under her fingers. It doesn't look like food. Actually, it looks repulsive. She looks up at her friends. Hesitates. Pinpoints her gaze on Mike. He understands immediately.

"We're not teasing you, I promise. Look, want me to eat one first?" He asks her, taking the package from Dustin.

"Yes," she says. She waits expectantly and he rips a blue worm in half with his teeth. Chews. Swallows. Crams the rest in.

"See? It's candy. You try." She does. It's sour and sugary all at once. Her face puckers as she chews. They watch her intently, because it's just fucking interesting to see her do everything for the first time. It's like watching a movie. Mike sees that they're all staring at her, shoving snacks in their mouths. He hastily asks her what she wants to try next.

She hates the moon pies and twizzlers. Loves Reese's and nachos. But the giant pretzel is her favorite. She dips hers in mustard and eats it with a rapturous expression on her face. Will offers her the rest of his and she happily accepts. Their game is forgotten. Trash litters their table and the terminal. Gazing at the remains of their sugary feast, Dustin says, "Dude. She's like, totally going to need a dentist soon." She's eating another gummy worm.

"Have you ever gone to the dentist?" Lucas asks her. She shakes her head, then nods.

"No and yes?" Will asks.

"I didn't go. They came to me," she says.

"Did you like, need one a lot?"

She shakes her head and says carefully, "Cleaning once a year." Dustin looks disgusted.

"That's it? No cavities?" She shakes her head. Accepts a worm from Will. "Shit. I had like three last year," he says. "Did you not get any candy in there?" She swallows.

“No. No candy.”

“NEVER?”

“No.”

“Fuck. What did they feed you? I mean, they fed you, right?” Lucas rolls his eyes.

“Of course they fed her, does she look dead to you?” Dustin moves to hit him but Lucas jerks away.

“I just meant like, did they feed you enough?” She does it again. Shakes her head, then nods. She can see they don’t understand.

“I had to eat...a lot. For the tests.” She looks away. Using her power for anything strenuous takes a lot of energy. The bath takes an enormous amount of energy. They fed her three huge meals a day, and healthy snacks. Vitamins. Shakes. The tests used more energy than she was consuming. It’s why she was so starveling when she escaped.

“Oh right. I bet. Not enough, though, right?” Lucas asks her. She shakes her head. No. Dustin jumps in because she’s looking a little detached.

“Well, you can eat whatever you want now. Here, try this.” He hands her a can of coke. It’s not exactly cold, but it tastes good no matter what the temperature is. Or at least his latest cavity says so. She doesn’t take it. She’s staring at it and she has that look on her face again.

“No.”

“It’s awesome! Try it. Look, we all have one.” He looks at Lucas, who’s already tossed his can on the table. “Or we did all have one, anyway.”

“No.”

“Come on! One sip?” He sets it down at the terminal next to her. Mike squeezes in beside her.

"I'll try it first if you want," he offers. She doesn't look at him. Remembers the test. And what came after. She's getting that feeling. The one she thinks of as the lonely Eleven feeling. She knows that it's harmless, that her friends like it, that it's normal. It just makes her feel more alone. And Mike doesn't seem to understand this time, which makes it worse because he usually does.

She jumps a little as the can leaves her vision. Will has removed it. He hands it back to Dustin and smiles at her. It's such a sweet smile that she has to respond with one of her own. "She doesn't want it, guys," is all he says. His tone brooks no argument. Mike finally gets it, realizes that there must be an unpleasant association for her there somewhere. He feels horrible that he didn't notice. That Will noticed instead. Then he feels horrible about feeling horrible. She needed something and Will's the one that was able to help this time. He feels grateful instead.

Sort of.

"Okay!" Will says. "Another game?" He looks at Eleven. She's already tapping their names into the console. "Wait, El." She pauses. "Want to play teams this time?" He looks at his friends. They're an uneven number, but what the hell.

"I'm captain!" Dustin asserts. "Here, like this," and he shows El how to enter the team names. He chooses Sith for his team. "Okay, who's going to be Luke to my Darth?" he asks. "El, you want to be captain?" She nods.

"Alright, you pick first. Who do you want on your team?" Will is surprised. Usually the decision takes at least 20 minutes of bickering and listing of strengths and weaknesses to come up with the perfect, evenly balanced team. Lucas is great, Mike is okay, Will is horrible. Dustin's unpredictable, sometimes he's hot shit and sometimes he eats shit. It's a crapshoot having him on a team.

"Mike," she says, to absolutely no one's surprise at all.

Mike gives her a little smile while Dustin gives her a pained glance. "Okay, but, El. He blows." Mike splutters. She looks at Dustin coolly. "I am sincerely trying to help you out right now since it's your first

time at the helm. You want Lucas, trust me.”

“Mike.” Definitive.

Dustin sighs. “Fine, fine. It’s your funeral. But I’m picking next, and I’m going to pick Lucas. So if you want to change your mind, now’s your chance.” She turns her back on him, facing the console again. Lucas has already entered her team name. Jedi. She calmly types in “Mike.” Dustin rolls his eyes.

“Okay. Now, what are we going to do about Will?” he asks, as if there’s a huge conundrum there. “He sucks harder than you do, Wheeler. And no offense, don’t squeeze my brain out or anything, but you’re not very good yet either, El. So maybe Will should be on my team. He can handicap Lucas and even things out.” He sounds reluctant because Will blows dead rats.

“No! That’s now how it works. I’m already handicapped by you! Put them together and you maybe get like one decent bowler,” Lucas argues.

“I’m right here, guys.” Will says, aggrieved. They ignore him and bicker over each other until El settles the argument for them. She types in “Will” underneath Mike’s name.

“Thanks,” he says and she smiles at him.

“No using the Force this time,” Lucas warns. She laughs. Mike bowls first for the Jedis. Lucas and Dustin are leafing through a comic and Will goes to investigate. Mike heads back after knocking down an impressive two pins and grabs the comic. They tussle.

“Hey! Careful!” Dustin squeaks.

The game is momentarily forgotten. El is eating the nacho dregs and watching the strobe light over the lane. Mike glances over, quickly, just to make sure she’s not getting bored. She’s facing away from him and he marvels at how fast her hair is growing. It’s still shorter than his, but there’s progress. Secretly, he liked the way she looked with a buzz cut. It just worked for her somehow. It made her eyes look even bigger. Or just easier to focus on. Something. He doesn’t really know,

he just knows he liked it. Not that he dislikes it now, it's dark and pretty.

He quickly turns his attention back to the comic and therefore doesn't see Eleven stiffen. She's been watching the lights, it is cosmic bowling day according to the sign, and it's semi-dark in the room now. It looks nice. She's gotten used to the noise. She's feeling happy and relaxed until something changes. The little hairs on the back of her neck are trying to stand up and she suddenly feels more attuned to her surroundings than usual. More focused.

She doesn't know what predator means, or prey, but she's feeling the instinct. The survival instinct. The instinct of the hunt. Her senses have always been sharp. She's felt the instinct before, as predator and prey. When she was facing the Demogorgon, she was both. When she was hiding from the Bad Men, she was prey. She's feeling that instinct now and she knows that something is different. Something is about to happen. There's something she needs to get ready for.

She panics a little, but not deep down. Deep down she's calm. She's staring at the lights but she's not seeing them. She's reaching out with all of her senses and sharpening them. She tunes everything out except for the instinct feeling. She can't hear the guys bickering anymore, but she can hear footsteps approaching, long before they do. When they get closer, she relaxes slightly. Not the Bad Men. Not a monster. Something else. She can handle it. She keeps her eyes fixed in front of her, waiting. She holds herself so still she's almost invisible. Your eyes would pass right over her. She's hidden. Like a tiger preparing to leap.

"Turn the page, I'm done," Lucas says. Dustin waits until the other guys gesture. There's not room for Will at the table, so he stands beside them and leans over to see. He's suddenly aware of a shadow over him, but before he can turn, someone claps him on the back. Hard. It would seem like a greeting except for the force. He stumbles a little and Mike grabs him, steadies him.

"Hey, fag! How's it going?" It's a familiar voice. Unwelcome. He'd rather be coughing up slugs than hearing it. The boys tense. It's Troy and James. Fuck, Mike thinks. They've given the boys a wide berth for months, but as Mike already knows, nothing good lasts forever.

They've been getting bolder since Will got out of the hospital because they just can't resist. And it's been safe to do so, because they've only seen the bald freak once. They haven't forgotten her (Troy's arm was broken in three places, and it still hurts sometimes) but it no longer acts as a deterrent.

"What are you freaks up to?" Troy asks. He grabs the comic from Dustin and leafs through it. He's always careful. He knows the fine line of what he can get away with in public, with adults around, and what they will notice. He also knows that there aren't that many adults in here right now, and none of them are paying any attention. "God, you guys are fucking losers," he says. He tosses the comic to James.

"Give it back, asshole!" Will grabs for it and James holds it out of reach. It's easy to do because Will is the smallest.

"Hey, zombie boy, I hear you and your dipshit brother are about to be homeless." He guffaws. "Your mom's broke, she's spent all her wad paying these losers to hang out with you." James laughs.

"Shut up!" Will says. He grabs for the comic.

"Yeah, Byers. Do your mom a favor and die for real next time, all right?" James states. "Third time's the charm and everything." The other guys are standing now, too.

"Get the fuck out of here," Dustin bites.

"Go jerk each other off somewhere else," Lucas adds.

"Yeah? Byers, you know all about that, right? Which one of them are you paying overtime for that, faggot?" Troy smirks at him. Mike snaps and lunges suddenly, pushes Troy as hard as he can, but Troy barely stumbles. He shoves Mike back, sending him sprawling back into the booth where he hits his funny bone for the second time today.

"Leave."

The voice sounds remote and cold. Disinterested.

Everyone glances over in shock, because they've all forgotten her for the moment. The four boys quickly meet each other's eyes, reading the various expressions in them. Mike is anxious, because Eleven needs to pass unnoticed. Beating the shit out of these assholes would kind of blow that out of the water. Dustin lightly raps Lucas on the shoulder. He's beaming. "Oh, fuck yes," he breathes ecstatically. Lucas is eager because he missed it the last time. Will looks upset, angry, amused and worried all at once.

Troy and James regard the owner of the voice. They take in the diminutive back. Short dark hair. Skinny frame. "Oh, you got a new friend?" James asks Will. "Looks like Mommy put an ad in the paper." And to the voice, "Who the fuck is going to make me?" Eleven doesn't turn.

"Me," she says. Still disinterested.

Mike can hear the cold rage in her voice and starts to get up. Hurriedly asks, "Why don't you guys just get out of here? We aren't doing anything and it's not like you can start anything in here." Troy pushes Mike back into his seat again, but with a curious gentleness. His attention is focused elsewhere. They are looking at the overall-clad back. They laugh because this guy is almost as small as Byers.

"You and what army, tiny?"

The figure stands up, unhurriedly, keeping her back to them. Even skinnier than they thought. She turns around to face them slowly. Her eyes are on the floor.

"Just me."

The guys collectively hold their breath. Troy's tensed, ready to shove the little shit all the way down the lane. More fun than regular bowling. He stops.

It's a girl.

Troy and James stare at her in surprise and amusement. It's a look completely without recognition. The last time they saw her, her head was nearly shaved. She was dirty and bloody and a year younger.

This girl is neatly dressed. Dark pixie cut.

“Shit,” he says, and turns to look at her friends. “This is a new level of pathetic, you guys know that? Letting a girl defend your honor?”

Dustin nearly giggles. “Not exactly new, numbnuts,” he mutters. He can’t believe they don’t recognize her. She looks almost the same, except that she’s clean and has a few more inches of hair. Big deal. Fucking idiots. No wonder they’re flunking science.

“Sweetie, why don’t you leave this to the men, huh? They aren’t worth it. If anything, they should be protecting you, not the other way around.” He looks at Dustin. “You guys aren’t going to help her out? Seriously? That’s really sad,” he says.

“They don’t need to.”

Her voice is emotionless and they study her again. She finally raises her eyes from the floor. James sees the huge dark eyes, darker with anger. Sees the fury in them. He’s seen it before. He suddenly feels cold all over. “Shit,” he breathes, and backs up.

“What?” Troy asks. Eleven lowers her chin towards her chest. Her eyebrows draw together in a frown and she glares at him. He feels the power radiating from her. It seems to suck all the air out of the room and time slows down.

It’s the bald freak. “oh fuck,” he says in a distant, dazed little voice. James is already gone. Troy backs up a hesitant step. His eyes are wide and fearful. The last time he saw her, she broke his arm just by jerking her chin. And all those rumors. He swallows. Takes another step back. He’s afraid to run, afraid it might provoke her. Russian spies. The massacre in the school that was never really explained. Almost 50 dead. Blood leaking out of their eyes and ears. Torn in pieces.

Was that you? He wonders to himself. He nearly wets himself when there’s an immediate reply.

“Yes. Me.”

He draws in a shocked breath. She fucking read his mind. He looks at

her, mouth dry. That's fucking crazy. Crazier than her being able to use her mind to break his arm, somehow.

"Leave."

"O-okay. Sure. I will. Um, Sorry," he says, lamely. As is that will help. Takes a slow step backward like she could lunge at him at any moment to tear his throat out. Although she wouldn't have to, and he knows it. They both do.

Mike suddenly grabs his arm to do some damage control, which makes him shriek a little. He doesn't hear the sound even though it passed through his own lips. "Don't even think about talking about this. To anyone," he says. "And tell your asshole friend the same." He knows the threat might not work; it depends on just how scared he is. He talked once before, but that was before the night at the school.

"Yeah. Better not, man," Dustin agrees gleefully. "Or she'll hunt you down. And she can do it, believe me."

"Yes. I can." Eleven says coldly. She's still in position.

"I...I won't. I swear. I won't. Promise. I-" His voice cracks. Eleven can see that he's not going to stop babbling, so she jerks her chin hard to her right. Towards the door. Careful to stay in control while she does it because she wants to hurt him. She's a little glad to see him jump, as if expecting pain when she does it.

"Leave. Now."

And he does.

"Wow," Dustin exhales, impressed. He pats her on the arm and she slowly uncoils. Lifts her chin. She looks at them hesitantly, gauging their reactions.

"That was awesome!" Mike cries, and she smiles a little when Will agrees. They both hug her.

"I don't know, I think it's, like, not your best," Lucas murmurs. She looks at him in astonishment. "Well, I mean, you made him piss himself before. And I missed out on the last time. Couldn't you have

broken his other arm?"

"Next time," she says and they laugh hysterically while she stares at them in surprise. She means it. Mike throws an arm around her and she leans in slightly; breathing him in.

"Shit." It's Dustin.

"What?"

"We like, probably shouldn't tell Hopper about that."

"I think he's going to figure it out," Mike says as they watch Troy smack into the door in his haste to exit the building.